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ABSTRACT

Racism is still the central problem in Mississippi. The White community resists participation by African Americans in every aspect of political, economic, educational, and cultural life. Education is the key to breaking the system, and it is no secret that the state's school boards, legislators, and corporations want to keep Black children and other children of color undereducated. Mississippi maintains a dual, segregated education system: Whites attend private academies, and Blacks attend public schools. Educational problems facing Mississippi Blacks include high-stakes testing with no accountability for teachers or schools, corporal punishment, and criminalization of students. Empowerment of the African American community is essential. The Mississippi Education Working Group (MEWG) is a coalition of grassroots community organizations working in their local school districts to improve educational opportunities for African Americans. MEWG trains grassroots organizations to impact education policy in their local school districts and pools the resources of the local organizations to impact education policy at the state level. Profiles of six community organizations in the rural, impoverished Mississippi Delta region present community demographics, history, current work, accomplishments, and future goals. Common elements of these groups are their engagement in an ongoing meeting, training, and debriefing process; the active participation of young people through an intergenerational model of work; and their policy and legal work through MEWG. More resources for legal assistance are needed. Although most groups have large memberships, the bulk of the work falls on a dedicated few. Other existing groups that have the potential to engage in real organizing work are identified. (TD)

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COMMUNITY ORGANIZING FOR SCHOOL REFORM

IN

THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA

Nsombi Lambright
Southern ECHO

August 2001

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I. CONTEXTUAL PICTURE OF MISSISSIPPI

Racism remains the central problem in Mississippi. In this state, racism is more about *domination and control* of the African-American community by the white community, than about hate. African Americans and the state's other 3% population of Latinos and Asians completely dominate the state's cheap labor force in industries such as farming, factory work and prison labor. The private prison industry is the fastest growing industry in the state and prisons are competing with other companies for government contracts to produce goods such as clothing, shoes, metal goods and more. The state is relying on the continuation of the cheap labor force and prison occupancy to continue this system. Education is the tool to breaking the system and it is no secret that the state's school boards, legislators and corporations want to keep black children and other children of color undereducated.

In Mississippi the white community continues to engage in massive resistance to the effective participation by African-Americans in every aspect of political, economic, educational and cultural life. Consequently, the *empowerment* of the African-American community remains the essential need. Until the community is empowered the political, economic and educational systems of the State cannot be made *accountable* to the needs and interests of African-Americans at the grassroots level. Empowerment of the community requires that people have the *information*, *skills* and *organization* they need to participate effectively in the formation of public policy at every level of government.

The situation in Mississippi...

Under white control the Southern states remain the poorest states in the richest nation in the world, and *Mississippi is the poorest among them.* In some counties in Mississippi the *official* unemployment rate is as high as 15 percent, but the *effective* unemployment rate is actually as high as 40 percent in the African-American community.

In Mississippi 56% of black children live in *poverty*, compared to 15% of white youth. *[Statistics from: "A Demographic Profile of the Southeast," Center for Demographic Policy, Institute for Educational Leadership, October 1992.]* In Mississippi today, African-American communities continue to be plagued by the lack of a first-rate public education system, discrimination in employment, lack of access to enterprise capital, and lack of affordable, decent housing and health care.

Mississippi maintains a *dual, segregated education system*: one black, one white; one public, one private. The white community has created a *private academy* education system in every area of the state where the black population exceeds 25 to 35 percent of the total population. White political and business leaders, in the name of economic development, are targeting predominantly poor, rural,

African-American communities in Mississippi for the location of major dumping grounds for hazardous and toxic waste materials from across the nation.

Notwithstanding that economic progress has been made, *the gap* between the black and white communities is actually getting significantly wider in terms of education, income, economic opportunity, suitable and affordable housing and health care, environmental safety and effective access to the political process.

As a result of the 2000 Census count, Mississippi lost one of its three Congressional Seats. Black Mississippians are actively participating in the redistricting process to ensure that the congressional seat that is eliminated is not the seat of Bennie Thompson, the only African American congressman in Mississippi, of the 2nd Congressional District. Thompson has provided a tremendous voice for the African American community for the past eight years, especially for Black farmers in Mississippi. Mississippians are expecting many heated battles over who loses the seat.

Mississippi's impact on the South and the Nation...

The political and business leadership which dominates Mississippi and the South now controls the United States Congress and the United States Supreme Court. As a result, the United States Congress and the United States Supreme Court are systematically dismantling the capacity of the federal government to protect and secure federally created and guaranteed fundamental rights. This same process took place after Reconstruction in the 1870s and 1880s and created the basis for the subjugation of African-Americans under the system of ***racial segregation***.

Today the national civil rights organizations are weak, the labor movement is on the defensive, and the Democratic Party has lost its focus. This political vacuum has enabled the Dixiecrat and States Rights leadership of the far right, through the conservative movement, to control the Republican Party. As a result, Deep South legislators once again dominate the agenda of the United States Congress; for example, former Texas Governor George W. Bush is now president and Mississippi Republican Senator Trent Lott is Senate Majority Leader. In addition, the most recent census counts resulted in the loss of a congressional district for Mississippi. Therefore, the timing for political empowerment for disenfranchised communities is very critical.

Factions in both the Republican and Democratic parties, using the language of the new conservatism, have seized the center of the national debate and are in the process of effectively undermining 60 years of progressive thinking and legislation about the role of government in a fair and just society. Their spirit is often mean and their language insensitive. But the voice of the human rights movement has been weak and uncertain, and the movement has failed to respond effectively.

Those who are in control will not yield their domination of the African-American community until they are forced to do so by effective African-American community organizing strategies. Only when the African-American community in the South is empowered and able to make the system *accountable* to the needs and interests of the community, can the community begin to fight white domination and control effectively, make the South a real *democracy*, and lead the nation away from the abyss.

It has been 44 years since *Brown vs. Board of Education* held racially segregated public schools unconstitutional because it imposed the stigma of race and the stamp of inferiority on the children who were the objects of the official policy of racial separation. But in Mississippi today there is still a dual school system: one public, one private; one black, one white. The white community in the Mississippi Delta has kept its children in private academies since the federal courts issued its school desegregation orders in Mississippi in 1971.

Public education remains a turbulent battleground for Mississippians because it is the one tool that unlocks and dismantles the cycle of poverty for communities that have been historically underserved. Education provides the framework that enables individuals to pursue the fundamental elements of a free society: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But in Mississippi today, the white establishment continues to control access to knowledge, capital and the franchise in order to maintain a dual school system.

National School Board Association studies demonstrate that 63.3% of all black school children attend segregated schools. In Mississippi, black students comprise 55% of the statewide enrollment in public schools (highest in the United States) and 80.3% of the black students attend segregated public schools (3rd highest in the nation). (*Two Nations, Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal*, Hacker, Andrew, Scribners, 1992, pg.162-163). The total black population in Mississippi, however, is only about 36.3% (2000 Census).

In 1992, the United States Supreme Court determined in the *Ayers* case that Mississippi's colleges and universities were still racially segregated in violation of the principles set forth in the 1954 *Brown* decision. The strategies to be used to end racial segregation in the colleges and universities is still being fought out in the College Board (Institute of Higher Learning), the State Legislature, and the courts. One group consisting of black college instructors, community people and elected officials has emerged as an organizing force during the negotiation process. This group will discussed in the "potential organizations" section of this report.

Mississippi public schools are starved for resources by the state legislature and county boards of supervisors that control local school budgets. The State Board of Education acknowledges that there is a statewide crisis of insufficient numbers of teachers in the schools, especially in the area of basic skills, such as reading and math, and that Mississippi schools rank among the lowest in the United

States in teacher salaries, per pupil expenditures, and student performance on standardized testing. In addition, every year the racial balance among teachers and administrators shifts in the direction of domination by whites (teachers are now 75% white, 25% black), even as the racial balance of students in the public schools becomes increasingly black. Mississippi is 35% black, but its public schools are 56% black.

Education remains a turbulent battleground for Mississippians in terms of equity for public schools, high stakes testing, college and career preparation and the stigmatization of African American students. Basically, the policies of the legislature and local school districts are maintaining the disparity between African American students and Caucasian students by continuing the implementation of high stakes testing without providing adequate attention to a critical teachers shortage that prevents students in poor school districts from receiving a quality education that would enable them to perform well on these tests. Additionally, more focus is placed on sending students to the military than in college, again, in predominately African American schools. Mississippi high schools, especially those in low performing districts, are littered with military literature throughout the hallways and counselors discourage students from seeking a higher education and instead recommend that they attend a two-year college or join the military. Finally, legislation is continuously being introduced that seeks to label students with behavior problems as juvenile delinquents which then leads to a greater law enforcement presence, finally leading to students becoming acquainted with law enforcement (and being locked up) before they finish school.

Presently, parents are fighting to have a 'voice' or a 'place at the table' in decisions affecting their children. Mississippi parents are facing some of the same problems that poor communities are facing all over the nation such as:

- *High Stakes Testing:* Mississippi students are required to pass criterion-referenced tests that compares them to other students nationally and subject matter tests determine whether they are going to pass on to the next grade. These tests are particularly important at the third, seventh or at the 12th grade level, to graduate from high school. The state tests are supposed to reflect the state's curriculum, however there have been no accountability standards placed on the schools or teachers for not effectively teaching according to the curriculum. However, students are held accountable to passing these tests, given only once, each year during their grammar school careers. The Mississippi Education Working Group (MEWG) has developed relationships at the state level with officials from the state department of education's Office of Student Assessment and Office of Accountability in an effort to gather information about these critical tests and to examine possible options for communities to assist their students in passing these tests. Armed with this information, community groups have sponsored meetings and workshops locally, with parents and students to inform them about testing practices and procedures. These meetings have enabled parents and students to understand the purpose of these tests so that hopefully, they can supplement learning in areas that the schools are not addressing so that students can perform sufficiently.

• *Corporal Punishment:* Many of Mississippi's public school districts allow corporal punishment as a disciplinary method for students grades Kindergarten to 12th grade. Students are often asked to touch their ankles while being beaten with a thick piece of wood. If students refuse to be beaten, they are suspended from school for 3 days regardless of the offense. Students with health problems and students with special needs also face this abuse. Students with special needs are punished for exhibiting behavior caused by their condition. Many students are left with bruises from these beatings and parents had a difficult time bringing charges against teachers and schools because of the lack of resources to pay for legal assistance and the lack of attorneys who do not fear fighting the school system. Students are beaten into submission to the will and rule of the teachers and principals. Students are punished for defiance of authority if they question their punishment or the teacher's charges.

• *Criminalization of students: unfair and excessive suspensions and expulsion rates; substandard alternative schools; zero tolerance policies; the direct linkage of schools to the criminal justice system.* The routing of students from schools to jails is another major issue for African American parents and students. Schools have formed partnerships with the local law enforcement agencies that allow officers to have free reign of schools and to apprehend students for school offenses, often transporting them from the school to juvenile detention centers. Students are suspended for such minor offenses as chewing gum or not raising their hands to ask a question. Additionally, schools are using zero tolerance policies to kick students out of school without following due process procedures properly and without any sensible considerations of the students' circumstances or past record. Once students are sent to alternative schools, they are faced with random searches, unqualified and uncertified teachers and an overall lack of a positive learning environment. Students who enter the alternative school setting are often not prepared to re-enter the mainstream school system. Many eventually drop out or are held back once they re-enter the mainstream school. Students are being introduced and accustomed to the criminal justice system by their schools, further enabling them to familiarize themselves with this system; so that by the time they finish school, they are used to it.

The issue of corporal punishment within the school system has been a controversial one for African American communities in Mississippi. The Biblical passage "Spare the rod, spoil the child" is often repeated at community meetings when groups are attempting to develop strategies around ending physical and emotional abuse towards African American students. Many of the parents involved in the Mississippi Education Working Group (MEWG), a collaboration of grassroots community groups working on public education issues from throughout the state, have come to the conclusion that they are <u>not</u> against corporal punishment when used properly, however, since their experience with corporal punishment within their children's public schools have been abusive and demeaning, instead of corrective, they have taken the position to end all forms of physical punishment within the public school system. Within some school districts, students are paddled for minor offenses such as chewing gum, students speaking without raising their hands and any other behavior or incident that the teacher

considers disruptive or insubordinate. Most of the time, the decision is left up to the teacher, regardless of what the student handbook says or does not say. There have been several incidents within schools in the Mississippi Delta where students have been beaten so viciously that they were bruised and blistered by the time they made it home. The Department of Human Services and the Department of Education have taken hands off positions when these types of cases have been brought to their attention. Part of the work of MEWG and the local community groups is to develop strategies that will force these entities to take action on these cases or to get legal assistance that will enable them to take these cases to court.

The Mississippi Delta

The Delta region of Mississippi is located in the northern region of the state, bordering western Tennessee and Arkansas. The Mississippi Delta is best known for being the home of Blues music and legends such as B.B. King and Clarence Carter. The Delta is also considered the place that the "Civil Rights Movement Passed By" and is infamous for its impoverished conditions and high rates of many negative statistics (pregnancy, illiteracy, unemployed, high school drop out, etc.). Many may remember Sugar Ditch, once called the poorest community in the nation, where residents did not have indoor plumbing and families were sick from malnutrition. Things are a little better in Tunica now, due to a surplus in county revenue from casino gambling. However, African American residents, who make up about 75% of Tunica's population are still struggling to 'have a voice' when it comes to the education of their children.

The Delta is located within the 2nd Congressional District of the state, which is represented by Congressman Bennie Thompson. This region of the state holds the largest number of school districts with a critical teachers shortage and also has the largest number of new prisons (see map). Most of the Delta's residents work on large farming plantations or poultry processing factories. Over 96% of White children in the Delta attend private academies. However, representation on school boards is overwhelmingly white.

Mississippi has very interesting ways of selecting its school boards and superintendents. In communities where there is a municipality, school board members are elected and the superintendent is elected. In counties where there is only a county school district, the superintendent and the school board are appointed by the city council or city alderman. However, some school districts have a mixture of school board members who are appointed and elected depending on the part of the community that they are representing. Confusing? Residents think so too. Part of many of the community strategies around education reform involve examining the election and school board appointment opportunities to ensure that no voting rights laws are being violated.

Community organizing has deep roots in Mississippi, most notably during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's, leading to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the

Constitutional Amendments that finally acknowledged some human rights of African American citizens. The groups that will be discussed below are following in the tradition of organizations like the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Freedom Riders. They have analyzed the learnings from the movement that address the break down of these organizations once integration occurred. Many thought that the war was over once blacks won the right to vote and integrate schools, residential areas and public places. Therefore, the larger movement ceased after integration. Grassroots community organizations who are engaged in community organizing work today have learned two things from the Civil Rights Movement:

(1) ***Do not take leaders out of their local community.*** During the movement many community leaders were taken out of their local communities in order to assist in the national fight, leaving the local communities without any tools and skills to make the necessary changes that would benefit their communities.

(2) ***Engage in ongoing strategic planning processes that enable communities to determine what the short term and long term goals are.*** As stated earlier, many felt that when schools and other places were integrated, that the fight was over because the activists never engaged in a conversation that determined what they would consider "winning". These organizations are engaging in long term and short term strategic planning processes that allow each and every member to *take ownership* of the process and understand what the ultimate outcomes should be.

II. Mississippi Education Working Group

In response to growing concerns about the state of public education in Mississippi, the ***Mississippi Education Working Group (MEWG)*** was created by more than 80 students, parents and community activists who attended a training hosted by Southern Echo in 1996 at Tougaloo College, entitled *Advancing Community Organizing Skills, Part 5: Creating a Quality Public Education for Mississippi's African-American Families -- An Inter-Generational Vision, Strategy and Program of Work.*

The *MEWG* is a coalition of grassroots community organizations working in their local school districts to create a quality, first-rate public educational opportunity for African-American families in their school districts.

The *MEWG* has *two* primary thrusts:

1) to provide training, technical and legal assistance to grassroots organizations in support of their efforts to impact the formation of public education policy in their local school districts; and
2) to pool the resources and strength of the local organizations to impact the formation of education policy at the state level, in support of the work which the organizations are doing at the local level.

In addition, it is a fundamental premise of this work that in order for the African American community to impact public education policy at the local or state level, it will be essential that effective *organizations* and new, young *leadership* be developed that: 1) understand the fundamental principles of community organizing; 2) that can be held accountable to the needs and interests of the community through the building of a broad base of support and participation within each community active in the *MEWG*, and 3) that are willing to build the work from the beginning on an *inter-generational model* of participation, in whic h younger and older people work together as equals.

The *Mississippi Education Working Group* project is the first time in Mississippi that a *coalition* of grassroots community organizations, rooted in and led by the African-American community, has been formed to work together to impact public education policy at the *state* level to support the work being done at the *community* level.

In the past, each of these communities has seen itself as separate from, having different needs and interests from, having problems far greater than, all other local communities. For the first time, community people from different school districts have come to understand that they have *common ground* on which they can work together, that they can build strength through unity and unity through organization, that they cannot succeed even at the local district level without having a *collective impact* at the state level, and that their attitude of isolation and sense of uniqueness in the past have contributed to their powerlessness.

In the past ***Southern Echo*** has worked with these individual communities separately, responding to their respective requests for training, technical and legal assistance. In addition, in the past ***Southern Echo*** has brought individuals from each of these communities together at residential training schools and regional workshops in the Delta around specific skills or subject matters, with the expectation that the participants would utilize the training in their separate communities.

The MEWG changes the framework of the way work is being done, while building upon the foundation laid in the past. The local organizations which comprise *MEWG* continue to set their own agendas in their local communities. But the local agendas have the benefit of input from the process of creating the vision, strategies, and programs of work at *MEWG* meetings and training sessions. In addition, for the first time local organizations, understanding their common purpose and common ground, support and assist each other in connection with the work each is doing at the local level, as well as at the state level. This grassroots effort to build unity statewide, and to pool resources across traditional plantation, city and county lines around education issues, has not been done before in Mississippi.

At the same time, the capacity to understand and move to another level of organizing work, such as *MEWG*, is the direct outgrowth of the ***Southern Echo*** vision, strategies and program of work designed to:

1) create a cadre of organizers in the Delta committed to the empowerment of the community;
2) create new, broad-based, accountable leadership and organizations that understand that the empowerment of the community is essential to the ability of the community to hold the political, educational, economic and environmental systems accountable to the needs and interests of the community; and
3) provide training programs that assist the community to understand that the education system in Mississippi has played a key role in the methods by which the white community has maintained domination and control of the black community.

Intergenerational Model- All of the member organizations of MEWG engage in an intergenerational community organizing model where young people are included in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the work on the same level as adults. The active inclusion of young people in the work has been critical to the success that Southern Echo and grassroots community organizations from around the state have experienced over the years. The thoughts behind this model are that (1) young people tend to be less fearful than older people and that (2) they have the least resistance to change. Additionally, most young people have their fingers on the pulse of community issues, especially those that are related to the public school system. The belief of Southern Echo and MEWG is that the fight for positive social change will not be effective unless a new generation of community

organizers is created to work at the grassroots level to develop, educate and train new leaders and organizations across the state and region.

Accomplishments and Milestones of MEWG

As an outgrowth of the training process, Mississippi Education Working Group participants held a series of meetings with the State Supt. of Education, the department heads of the various divisions of the State Board of Education, and with state legislators. In these meetings, community activists explored the limitations of high stakes testing policies, and the contradiction in state policies which heighten testing requirements for students while permitting uncertified, unqualified teachers to work in the classrooms. In addition, participants laid the foundation for working to keep legislators informed during the 2000 legislative session on which new bills would work against the needs and interests of the African American community.

In addition, the statewide trainings have enabled local community groups to take information back into their local communities in support of local community organizing work around public education issues. Once armed with information from regarding legislation and statewide policies, groups began to sponsor local trainings and meetings with community, public officials and teachers to educate parents about upcoming legislation, existing policies (and to identify possible violations) and to develop strategies around addressing some of the inadequacies of their school districts.

During the 2000 legislative session MEWG worked on the new high stakes accountability legislative package put forward by the State Department of Education to implement the high stakes testing legislation adopted in 1999. MEWG focused on the necessity of ensuring effective parental and other grassroots community involvement in the formation of policy at the local school level, in the assessment of problems and design of local school-based improvement plans, and in the implementation of the improvement plans.

For the first time in history, an organization of grassroots parents became an effective player in the formation of education policy at the state level. After a series of meetings and negotiations with senators on the Senate Education Committee, the State Superintendent of Education and many of his staff people, the Senate adopted some of the specific policy changes requested by MEWG to increase parental and community participation in the assessment and evaluation process at the local school district level.

As part of this process, community people learned how to draft legislation in the format used by the legislature and to manage the legislative process to effect changes in the policies being considered by the State Department of Education. The support of senators for the changes was made easier by the fact that the staff of the State Department of Education threw support behind some of the proposed changes requested by MEWG.

Most important, community leaders and organizational members came to understand their capacity to negotiate their vision and strategies at the state level, which they had always been pressured to believe that they could not do. Through building a relationship with the chair of the Senate Education Committee and other key legislators and state department of education officials, MEWG was invited to draft alternative language for the state's school accountability plan. Much of the alternative language that was submitted was adopted by the Senate Education Committee during a special session. As a result of their input, community people now have a place at the table when decisions are being made about low performing schools, through the creation of Parent Student Accountability Councils. This work laid the foundation for MEWG groups to anticipate the proposed legislation for the 2001 legislative session. One bill that was included in the legislative package was a "School Safety" Bill that permitted school officials to label students "habitually disruptive" after displaying what they consider to be disruptive behavior. This identity becomes a part of the students' permanent record and allows schools to recommend students for expulsion after the third offense. MEWG participants learned about the bill and immediately began to meet and discuss its components and necessary actions to take against it. While developing strategies, they decided to talk to key legislators to help them to understand why this bill would not be positive for African American students. Upon the invitation of members of the Legislative Black Caucus, members of MEWG developed a position paper detailing why this legislation was in direct violation of every students' right to a free and appropriate education. They also submitted alternative language that softened some of the harshness of the bill. Although the bill did pass both houses, some of the alternative language was included. Communities will now have to develop strategies to deal with the labeling process that will undoubtedly lead to more suspensions, expulsions and dropouts.

The Mississippi Education Working Group is presently developing a training agenda for communities interested in understanding Title I appropriations, IDEA regulations, laws around compulsory school age, the federal T.H. III case dealing with a student's right to a free and appropriate education. They are also working collectively to address local community issues, some of which are detailed below, and working to impact 2002 education legislation.

ORGANIZATIONAL PROFILES

Tallahatchie Education and Redistricting Committee
Tallahatchie County, MS

Total Population: 37,000
80% Black; 15% White; 5% Latino
West Tallahatchie School District- 99.79% Black Student Population

Beginnings: The Tallahatchie Education and Redistricting Committee was formed in 1998 as a component of Tallahatchie Housing, Inc. as a way to address the political awareness and youth issues identified by African American citizens in Tallahatchie County. Tallahatchie County was one of the first counties in Mississippi where black people "took over" many of their political offices after the 1990 Census and Redistricting. For the first time in history, the board of Alderman the election commission, two of the most powerful bodies in the county, were majority African American. Since this victory, black county residents have been forced to determine the most strategic ways to utilize this newfound power that would enable them to address some of the long time community problems in Tallahatchie County. During the redistricting process, in which community played a major role, several community problems were identified. The two major problems were housing and education. There was not enough affordable and quality housing in the county. Families suffered from three-generational living arrangements where one home would house a fifty-something year old woman, her twenty-something year old children and their children. It was also very common to see a household with ten or more family members crammed into a two or three bedroom house. Tallahatchie Housing, Inc. (THI) was formed in 1992 to address housing and community issues in Tallahatchie County. Once THI began to make significant improvements in the housing situation in the county, volunteers began to look at other issues that were affecting the prosperity of the community. The issue of education emerged again. Students were not performing well on tests and were being held back, suspended and expelled at outrageous rates. A group of parents and volunteers at THI began to meet around these issues and revitalized the Tallahatchie Education and Redistricting Committee (TERC) in 1998. The project had existed since the beginning of THI as one of its components but had not taken off like the housing component had. The group started to identify and develop strategies to address issues around education and ensure that community people would maintain their present political power and continue to enhance it. The group established its own identity in 1998 by becoming incorporated and opening its own bank account to begin to raise funds independent of THI.

Present Work and Accomplishments: During the past two years, the group has been working to hold school officials accountable to providing their children with a first rate quality education and to

ending the systematic physical and verbal abuse usually performed by the over 70% white teachers and administrators in their more than 90% African American school district. Their first major accomplishment was getting a teacher fired from the high school for openly calling students the "n" word. Strategic planning has been key to TERC's organizing strategies. Continuous planning and debriefing allows them to prioritize the many issues that occur so that they may accomplish some things instead of just working on 'every thing'.

TERC is a multi-issue organization that consists of a board, two part-time staff people and over fifty (50) community volunteers and youth organizers. Some of their major areas of work have been holding school officials accountable to educating black students fairly and productively and maximizing the opportunities presented by having an overwhelmingly African American board of supervisors.

In 1999, after a community meeting, the group presented the superintendent with a list of demands and insisted on a meeting to address them. Approximately 11 demands were presented and the superintendent agreed to several of them including to re evaluate zero tolerance policies; publicizing all employment in the community (residents were angered because several qualified African American personnel had been passed up for positions in the school system); establishing a parent-led committee to make recommendations for school improvement; reviewing excessive number of suspensions and addressing bus overcrowding. They are presently working to build their capacity in order to develop a strategic plan around school improvement in order to follow up on the superintendent's request.

Future Goals: TERC is working on establishing their independence from Tallahatchie Housing, Inc., who still see TERC as a component of the larger organization. Presently the staff and board of THI have authority over the planning and implementation of the program of work around organizing, which members of TERC feel is not always in the best interest of the community. The transition will be a difficult one, especially since the staff members of TERC are also staff members at THI, therefore, they are now attempting to get training for both organizations that will enable them to make a smooth transition without completely breaking away from the vision of THI.

They are coordinating the parent student committee that is working to develop a school improvement plan for the superintendent. One major piece of this work will be to develop strategies that will ensure the superintendent's support on the issues once they are presented. Two of the portions involving ending zero tolerance policies and improved standardized testing procedures will be especially challenging. However, they are confident that if they maximize the relationships with their elected officials that they can gain support and backing that will enable them to implement their plan.

Direct action has been one of the most beneficial tools for TERC in their organizing work around education. They insist that because of the 'hands off' approach that the teachers and administrators take when approached with community problems, that it is not until they hold large meetings, interrupt school board meetings with large numbers of people and march into the offices of officials who have ignored or avoided them, that the power structure takes them seriously. Pat Brown, Coordinator, says, "For so many years, black people have not been active in the political or educational setting, that the school boards, teachers and principals do not take us seriously." She continued, "we have to demand to be heard!"

Citizens for Quality Education
Holmes County, MS

Total Population- 21, 522
Black- 76%; White- 22%
Holmes County School District- 100% Black Student Population

Beginnings: Citizens for Quality Education (CQE), formed in 1996, is a grassroots organization based in the very poor, rural communities of this 76% black county which is partly in the Delta and partly in the hills of central Mississippi. The Holmes County School District has the only 100% black student body population in the state and is ranked at the bottom in student achievement by the State Board of Education accreditation division. This district also has the highest teacher shortage rate in the Delta. CQE is a leadership development, education and training organization working to develop new grassroots leaders and organizers to empower the African American community in Holmes County, Mississippi. Their vision is based on the principle that all children can learn and have the right to learn. Their organization began when a group of parents began to meet and discuss a teacher within one of the elementary schools who had been mentally and physically abusing students. As they began to meet with other parents, they began to identify other issues of concern within the school district such as the fact that students were using outdated books that they could not take home, that there were no extra curricular activities such as band or student council, the excessive drop out, suspension and expulsion rates and corporal punishment. With technical assistance from Southern Echo, the group began to organize a formal organization, focused on addressing these issues.

Present Work and Accomplishments: During the past couple of years, they have concentrated efforts on broadening their base of support by providing training to parents on being involved in their children's education through an understanding of curriculum, state testing standards, state and local school policies, federal Title I regulations and state education legislation. Their most recent accomplishments include:

- The development of seven (7) community organizers and leaders;
- The firing of a third grade teacher who was terrorizing her students by denouncing them in class, talking badly about their parents, and hitting them hard enough to bruise them;
- The creation and implementation of an After School Reading Program (many organizations have decided to supplement the inadequate instruction that's provided in the public schools by having after school programs that focus on test preparation, tutorial, history and culture, reading and math);
- Youth Governance Initiative- provides education, training and support to young people to enable them to participate effectively in decision-making in civic activities, the formation of public policy and the building of effective organization and community;
- Election of the organization's co-coordinator to the Holmes County School Board;
- Successful Environmental Justice campaign led by youth members to force the board of supervisors to clean over 21 illegal dumpsites in Holmes County
- Participation in MEWG.

CQE attributes much of their success to the active and ongoing involvement of young people, on the same basis as adults, in the organizing work. CQE works through an intergenerational model of organizing that requires the active participation of young people in the decision-making and implementation of the organizing work.

Future Goals: CQE plans to put more time towards building their capacity to prioritize their program of work in order become more effective. Programmatically, they will take advantage of their new voice on the school board and maximize opportunities to impact local policy. They will also continue to build relationships with legislators and work on state education policy. Organizationally, they will spend more time on organizational capacity issues such as board training, fundraising and staff development. Presently, they have one full-time organizer, one full-time office assistant and two part-time coordinators. In an effort to build local leadership in the state, Southern Echo employs one full time Organizer who is assigned to their organization. CQE is also developing a three year fundraising plan to raise funds to hire additional staff. Within the next two years, they would like to hire a full-time fundraiser and a full-time Youth Organizer. They would also like to get more training for their steering committee who will eventually transition into a board.

Action Communication Education Reform/Concerned Citizens of Montgomery County (ACEAR), Montgomery County, MS

Total Population- 12,400
56% White, 44% Black
Montgomery County School District- 87% Black Student Population

Beginnings: ACAER began in 1997 when community people, students and parents came together to deal with school injustices and to examine their role in creating better educational opportunities for their children. They began to meet in 1997 when the black high school in Duck Hill (a predominately African American town in Montgomery County) was closed and students were bused more than 40 miles away to another predominately black high school in Grenada (a town in an adjoining county). The interesting piece to this story is that there is a predominately white high school located in Winona (approximately 10 miles outside of Duck Hill) that the students could have attended. They began to receive technical assistance from Echo on developing the necessary tools and skills to engage in effective community organizing work around education issues. They began to implement a four part organizing strategy: investigation, education, negotiation and demonstration. Through the investigation stage, they realized that most of the problems that they were experiencing within the school system were caused by the superintendent, who had been in office for over 12 years. Through further investigation, they realized that he kept getting elected into office by the vote of the citizens of Winona, who have their own separate municipal school district. They decided that getting rid of the superintendent was critical to changing some of the injustices in the school system.

Present Work and Accomplishments: In the 1999-2000 school year, five 17 year old black male students were charged with felony assault when peanuts were thrown at the bus driver during a bus ride. Since most of the students on the bus were throwing peanuts, no one knew who actually threw the peanut that hit the bus driver. Each of the over 40 students on the bus were driven to the county courthouse were they were questioned for two hours without their parent's knowledge or consent. It was after this questioning that the five young males, three of which had prior records, were singled out. With legal assistance from Southern Echo and Jackson Attorney Rob McDuff, ACEAR was successful in getting the felony charges against the students dismissed. One of the key factors in this success was the building of a relationship with the African American female judge who was handling the case. Because of their understanding of the law, they were able to inform the judge on her right to release the students on their own recognances. Furthermore, the prosecuting attorney and superintendent let their guards down, never expecting community people to be able to fight this case and when the community and parents showed up at the arraignment hearing with counsel, they were dumbfounded.

Al White, chair of the ACEAR board, was elected to the school board in 1998. From this position, he has been able to keep the community informed on pending policy issues, helped the community to understand the issues and worked with the community at the meetings to impact the outcome of policy decisions. One of several major accomplishments that has occurred since Al's election to the board is the removal of an open transfer policy which allowed parents to transfer their children outside of the county. This tactic had been abused by white parents seeking to remove their children from the Montgomery County School System, continuing the stripping of resources from the already failing district.

In 1999, ACEAR, with legal assistance from Echo, the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law and Attorney McDuff, brought a suite in federal court to challenge the legitimacy of the 1999 election of the county school superintendent because voters from the separate municipal school in the town of Winona were permitted to vote in the election, although the county superintendent has no responsibilities to the Town of Winona school district. The county board of supervisors and the school district conceded the validity of the suit. The federal court upheld the claims of ACEAR, held the election procedures unconstitutional and ordered a new election in November of 2000. Without the votes of Winona, the long-term incumbent could not win the election. Another candidate, who the community considered to be the best choice among the candidates, won the election and took office immediately, under the terms of the federal court order. For the second time, the voices of poor black people from Montgomery County were heard. They began to understand their *power* (the ability to make things happen or not to happen).

Action has also started an After School Program focused on history/culture, computer/technology skills and tutorials. Over forty students, ages 5-18, attend the program from the hours of 3:15 p.m. until 5:30 p.m. each day. This is the first after school program that Montgomery County students have ever had. This program is even more significant considering the fact that there are no extra curricular activities within the school system such as band, student council, cheerleading, etc. A major part of this program is providing leadership training to the young people who are involved in the organizing work with Action.

Future Goals: Since the election of the new superintendent, members of Action are working to hold her accountable to addressing some of the issues set forth during the campaign. Since taking office in November, the superintendent has made one major move in support of the community. She discontinued corporal punishment in the classrooms and without a parent present at the elementary school. Students now have to be taken to the office, where their parents are called before the teacher or principal can administer a paddling. Community members hope that this practice spreads to the other schools as well. They will also develop a curriculum for the after school program to ensure that each student gets the attention that they need. Presently, there are not enough tutors for the number of students that attend the program.

Organizationally, Action will attempt to add more staff this year. Presently, the only staff of the organization is one full-time executive director. Volunteers receive stipends when the money is available. As they continue to raise funds, they want to make sure that the volunteers receive the training that will enable them to take jobs with the organization once the funding is available.

Concerned Citizens for a Better Tunica County
Tunica County, MS

Total Population- 8, 500
Black- 75.4%; White- 25%
Tunica County School System- 97% Black Student Population

Beginnings: Concerned Citizens for a Better Tunica County was created in 1993 as a coalition of activists, parents, students and school board members working to create a quality, first rate public education for African American families in this 76% black county which was ranked 2nd poorest in the nation in the 1990 census. With a 99.8% black student body in the public school system, with virtually all white students attending an all white academy established to avoid federal court school desegregation orders, and an economy entirely controlled by white plantation owners, the school district was on state probation because of the low student performance on standardized tests. During the early 1990's, river boat gambling came to Tunica, more than tripling its economy. During the same time, a Conservator was appointed to the school district to supposedly raise test scores. However, he immediately began to implement policies geared more towards controlling the school system than improving it. For instance, a group of parents had began to host an after school program at the school to help the test scores to improve; this program was eliminated. The contract of a math teacher who was using innovative techniques to help students learn math, was not renewed. Concerned Citizens began to develop strategies to gain more control of their school system.

Present work and Accomplishments: In 1993, Concerned Citizens formed an alliance with the then all-black Tunica school board, got the community involved, and negotiated successfully with the Tunica County Board of Supervisors to obtain 20% of the new casino tax revenues from the first two casinos. These revenues allowed the school district to pay down its debt and spend more money on improving student test scores. In 1996, the county school board voted to borrow as much as $15 million to build a new elementary school near the casinos, build a new middle school and renovate the existing schools. Concerned Citizens held workshops to educate the community on the applicable state law and to develop appropriate strategies, conducted a successful petition drive to require a county referendum on the borrowing of the funds, and forced the school board to enter into negotiations with the community regarding how best to use whatever funds it borrowed.

At the heart of the school's agenda was the goal of building a new, virtually all white elementary school near the casinos. The argument of the white community was that if the school board renovated the existing, all black schools, the white community should have a school which it could call its own. Otherwise, the white community would not send their children to the public schools.

At the end of four months of intense negotiations in which the black community developed its agenda and held its ground, the school board relented and agreed to borrow $6.26 million to renovate, rehabilitate and expand the existing schools for the children who already attended the school system. The issues of the new elementary school was put on a back burner for consideration only after all the renovation, rehabilitation and expansion of the existing schools had been *substantially* completed.

During 1997, Concerned Citizens fought the State Department of Education's efforts to abolish the district and to have the state run the school system. They, instead, appointed a conservator to stand in the shoes of the county school superintendent. At the same time, the conservator began to push the efforts of the building of the new elementary school in a location where no children presently live. The goal was to build a school that would attract wealthy white families because the housing structures that were to be built were priced at $102,000 and higher for a community where the median family income is $18,000. With support, legal and technical assistance from Southern Echo, Skadden Arps Law Firm (Washington, DC), the Advancement Project (Washington, DC), Attorney Rob McDuff (Jackson, MS), 2nd District Congressman Bennie Thompson and an array of both black and white state legislators, and alliance with the U.S. Department of Justice, Concerned Citizens were able to stop the building of the new school in its proposed location and negotiated for it to be built closer to the black community to ensure that all children would have the opportunity to attend. The community was able to win this victory despite the efforts of the local school board, the conservator, the County Board of Supervisors, the state board of education, the State Superintendent, U.S Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, state Attorney General Mike Moore and both black and white state legislators.

During 2000, members of Concerned Citizens won three school board seats giving them a majority of the five member board. For the first time in the history of the county, the black community, parents and students working together with school officials, have a real opportunity to work together to end the history of dismal education and to undo the damage to the educational process which the state conservator has caused.

Future Goals: After the exhausting battle over the new school and the fall elections, Concerned Citizens have now been able to focus on some strategic planning and fundraising. They presently have two full time staff members and are seeking to add two additional staff this year. They are also enhancing the role of the young people in the organization through a special project called Tunica Teens In Action. These young people are developing both leadership and civic participation skills by taking complete ownership of the planning and implementation of their program activities, some of which include a history documentation project, college preparation workshops and the documentation of school improvement issues.

Indianola Parent Student Group
Sunflower County, MS

Total Population- 11,809
Black- 70%; White- 30%
Indianola Public School District- 93%

Beginnings: The Indianola Parent Student Group (IPSG) began in 1994 as an outgrowth of a special after school math initiative called the Indianola Math Games League. The organization began after parents, who would talk while students participated in the program, began to discuss problems within the school system. During the 1997-98 school year, IPSG complained to the Indianola School Board that: the old majority white elementary school had a full science laboratory and up to date textbooks while the brand new all black middle school had no science laboratory at all and the science textbooks given to students were outdated, used books sent from another school district.

This disparity, along with many others, clearly violated the 1971 federal court school desegregation orders. The school district resisted the demands for a lab based on the grounds that the school district was without sufficient funds to correct the problems. However, through careful community investigation, IPSG discovered that there was revenue under 16th Section land funding that would support the building of the lab. As a result, the school district released the funds for the lab the following year and the lab was built less than a year later.

Present Work and Accomplishments: IPSG is presently working to protect the rights of students with special needs. Within the Indianola district, students with special needs are isolated, mistreated and undereducated. These students are being paddled for behavior that classifies them as special needs in the first place. IPSG has developed a relationship with state special education officials that enables them to provide technical assistance to parents of students with special needs who are experiencing problems. The group also has an Environmental Justice program that fought the owner of a field, located directly adjacent to a residential area and school, who sprayed pesticides during school hours. IPSG was able to build an alliance with the Federal Aviation Administration, who issued a moratorium on the spraying until the farmer could reach an agreement with community on the best times to spray. The farmer is not honoring this agreement and IPSG is presently developing strategies to hold him accountable.

In the 2000-01 school year, the principal of the local high school decided to begin having students arrested when they are disobedient to his or any school personnel's demands. After several students were handcuffed and arrested, without any formal charges, they would be allowed to sit for hours at the police department under the threat of charges. After complaints from students and parents were

ignored by the principal and superintendent, IPSG began a mobilization around the issue, published a short newsletter on the issues, held community mass meetings and invited the local television station to cover the story. As a result, the principal was suspended for one week by the school board and reprimanded for the ridiculous practices. The group is continuing to develop strategies to correct the range of anti-student practices which the principal has instituted. A student member of IPSG, who is student body president, led an internal protest at the school after which the principal agreed that no major disciplinary actions or changes in policy would occur until the student council reviewed it.

Future Goals: IPSG is working on organizational development issues that include board development, strategic planning, fund raising and staff development. They currently have one full-time office assistant, one full-time coordinator and several volunteers and Youth Organizers that receive stipends when the funds are available.

Drew Community Voter's League
Sunflower County, MS

Total Population- 2,349
Black- 66%; White- 34%
Drew Municipal Separate School District- 84% Black Student Population

Beginnings: The Drew Community Voter's League (DCVL) was formed in 1996 to address an unfolding set of parental concerns about the public school system in the town of Drew, MS. Parents contacted their state representative, Rep. Robert Huddleston, one of the newly elected black legislators whose districts were created in the redistricting effort of 1991-92. They also contacted Jerome Little, who became the first black county supervisor in the history of Tallahatchie County in 1993 after the redistricting fight in that county. Both Huddleston and Little had both worked closely with Echo staff during the redistricting work. They recommended to the parents in Drew that they contact Echo for assistance. Echo helped the parents and students in Drew develop a strategic planning process through which to fashion a common vision, strategies that grew out of the vision and a meaningful program of work to implement the strategies. More than forty parents and students participated in this series of planning meetings. After the planning sessions, the group went through a series of training workshops on community organizing and how to apply those principles to the work in Drew concerning the school district. Their program of work focused on the arbitrary and harsh student discipline practices at each of the Drew schools which led to a student drop out, suspension and expulsion rate in excess of 33 percent of the entire student body.

Present Work and Accomplishments: In 1996, the group was successful in getting the Drew city council to appoint the second black school board member to the five member school board. They

also began to investigate the extensive number of cases where students were physically abused or disciplined inappropriately and improperly by teachers and administrators. As a result, the high school principal was terminated, a teacher was fired and another administrator and teacher were disciplined by the school board. As a result of their early successes, the Drew school district began to retaliate against the students and parents within the district. In 2000, the school principals even started to cause the arrest of parents who come on the school grounds to see about their children, especially if they are known to be associated with the DCVL. The Voters League has provided support and defense for parents and students under attack by the school administration and teachers. As a result many students have been able to remain in school, or have won the right to return to school or avoid prosecution.

The Voters League has nearly completed a two year comprehensive investigation and report of conditions in the school system, which it will entitle an indictment of the district. The idea for an indictment was developed when the group began to strategize about an effective way to address the outpour of school violations, that for a while, were causing them to 'put out fires' in a reactive way instead of engaging in proactive work. DCVL expects to issue the report in 2001 identifying the problems, the proposed remedies in terms of policies and practices, and, with the assistance of the Advancement Project, Annenburg Rural Trust and the Harvard Civil Rights Project, will include legal and academic support for their proposals from both legal and academic authorities. The report will be provided to the community, the state department of education, the state legislature, the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Justice Department for an assessment that addresses violations of federal and state law, and to press for state intervention to correct the wrongful conditions in the district which are undermining the educational rights and opportunities of the students and their families.

Future Goals: Through this process, the Voters League has been able to grow and expand its base of support, with both parents and students. Part of their work now is to continue the training process that will allow the new members of the organization to become involved in the work at the same level as the older members. They are also enhancing the work of their young people, through a project called "Fun Thang". This project provides training and activities for young people involved in organizing work that seeks to further develop their understanding of history, culture and community organizing. The program will also focus on their academic and social development since Drew is another school district that discourages students from going to college and has no recreational/extracurricular activities.

IV. ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

The groups that were surveyed during this process were clearly engaged in community organizing activities that involves a great deal of strategic planning and training. One of the underlying themes with all of the groups was the ongoing meeting, training and debriefing process which allows them to assess where they've been, where they are and where they are going. They also engage in on going training that enables them to keep sharpening and refreshing their organizing tools and skills.

Another reoccurring theme was the active participation of young people, mostly through an intergenerational model of work. The young people within these organizations are on the boards and are actively involved in the organizing work. Most of the time, the organizations are unable to get documentation on what's happening within the schools without the participation of the young people. Furthermore, they play a big role in determining the issues that the organizations address. Although they are included in the work in this way, the organizations also see the need to include additional training for the youth that enables them to develop at their own pace.

Another common theme was the policy and legal work that each community is involved in locally and through the Mississippi Education Working Group. The organizations have seen policy work as a key tool in changing some of the oppressive systems that are undermining the education of their children. They are able to engage in this work through building relationships with their elected officials and through engaging in training around understanding policy and its affects on local communities. In some cases, they have been able to educate their legislators and school officials on policy issues.

The need for legal assistance is also a reoccurring theme. Most of the groups are at a place where they have engaged in the organizing work that has positioned them to deeply impact policy, however, without legal assistance, this piece of work goes on the back burner. The groups have been fortunate to receive assistance from organizations like the Advancement Project, the Alliance for Justice, the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, the Southern Poverty Law Center and the Harvard Civil Rights Project. They have also received legal assistance from prestigious law firms such as Skadden Arps and assistance from some local attorneys. However, since the work of these legal entities is pro bono, it is limited. Each of the group addressed the need for more resources for legal assistance in their work.

Each of the organizations were dealing with capacity issues. Although most have huge memberships, because of work and family obligations, the bulk of the work usually falls on a dedicated few. The groups were examining ways to maximize the training process in a way that will enable them to spread the work out in a more effective manner. Another strategy used to address this issue is the use of stipends for volunteers.

Name of Group	*5 years old and under*	*5 years and older*	*Budget above $100,000*	*Budget under $100,00*	*Intergenerational Model of Organizing*
Action Communication and Education Reform	X			X	X
Citizens for Quality Education	X		X		X
Concerned Citizens for a Better Tunica County		X	X		X
Drew Community Voter's League		X		X	X
Indianola Parent Student Group		X		X	X
Tallahatchie Education and Redistricting Committee	X			X	X

V. POTENTIAL ORGANIZATIONS

The six groups that were identified in this survey were the only organizations that Southern Echo was aware of that were engaged in organizing work, as defined by the committee, in the Mississippi Delta. There are, however, many community organizations and advocacy groups that have the potential to engage in real organizing work. Organizations such as Parents for Public Schools and Mississippi Action for Community Education (MACE) are organizations with the resources and the history to truly impact policy and help to build leadership throughout the state. There are also advocacy groups that want to learn more about including community in their processes around policy. However, they must dismiss the notion that community does not understand policy before they will be able to include them in a meaningful way.

Another group that has the potential to engage in some great organizing work is the Community Coalition for Ayers. The work of this group focuses on allowing community and college instructors to impact the negotiations around the settlement to bring equity to Mississippi's black colleges and universities. So far, lawyers have been dominating the entire process and not including community, students and college instructors in the decision making process.

There is a huge gap between service organizations, social justice organizations and advocacy groups. It appears that one way to bridge the gap would be to continue to understand each other's mission and goals. This understanding will develop ways to explore possible collaboration on certain pieces of work that will increase the impact of the community on changing current systems.

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